

## Review of *The Aesthetics of Excess: The Art and Politics of Black and Latina Embodiment* by Jillian Hernandez (Duke University Press)

by Iván Ramos | Book Reviews, Issue 11.1 (Spring 2022)

**ABSTRACT** *The Aesthetics of Excess* by Jillian Hernandez is a dazzling and provocative book that deploys the aesthetic as a category to grasp with great care the lives and representations of Black and Latina women whose performance of gender exceeds the white middle class norms of feminine comportment.

**KEYWORDS** performance, aesthetics, popular, Latina, Black women, excess

*The Aesthetics of Excess: The Art and Politics of Black and Latina Embodiment*. By Jillian Hernandez. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020, 303 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4780-1110-1. US List: \$27.95

A few years ago, while I was giving a guest lecture on the artist Xandra Ibarra, a young Latina student objected to the artist's performance of racialized femininity. To her, Ibarra—an artist trained in the Bay Area burlesque scene and who deploys excess femininity to great effect across her pieces—had fallen trap to the social pressures that signify Latina womanhood. How could Ibarra's performances be effective if they reproduced the patriarchal gaze that defines femininity? Jillian Hernandez's dazzling *The Aesthetics of Excess* provides a rigorous response to such accusations, often lobbed at Latina and Black women, and who are the protagonists of this book. Hernandez writes "of how notions of high and low culture are complicated when young women of color engage in cultural production, as well as how they challenge the disciplining of their bodies and sexualities through artistic authorship" (8). *Aesthetics of Excess* develops this claim throughout the book in order to emphasize the ways in which social codes surveil how young Black and Latina girls and young women, especially those coming from working class backgrounds, reaffirm themselves through a variety of means. Hernandez thus provides us with a thorough—and often moving—study of "how the discourse of aesthetic excess, and its attendant debates, significantly structure the boundaries around legitimate and deviant forms of gendered Blackness and Latinidad" (3).

Hernandez's particular investment in "sexual-aesthetic excess as a concept for theorizing modes of dress and comportment that are often considered 'too-much': too sexy, too ethnic, too young, too cheap, too loud" (12) blurs the distinctions between the intellectual and the personal. Her autoethnographic account details the many moments in which she has had to navigate these lines, and the disciplining toll brought upon social pressures to perform middle-class and "acceptable" modes of self-fashioning. The accounts that Hernandez provides of her own experiences, however, never fall into solipsistic reflection. Instead, they ground the book by showing readers that we are in the hands of someone who has spent time thinking and living through these questions. It is thus unsurprising that the resulting book feels like an offering grounded not only in the author's background, but also in the many Black and Latina girls and young women she invites into her narrative in order to provide us with a convincing, and urgent, argument.

*The Aesthetics of Excess* expertly deploys a wide methodological and disciplinary toolbox. The book is grounded by Hernandez's experience as the founder of Women on the Rise! (WOTR), a community project which, in collaboration with the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami, offered young incarcerated women access to "an intergenerational feminist art praxis" (1). WOTR was Hernandez's response to an unjust and often dehumanizing system that relegated these young women to often violent forms of engagement within the prison walls. Hernandez explains in detail the work and aims of WOTR with deep care. Indeed, Hernandez returns to the voices of these young women throughout the book. Her ethnographic account of this experience offers a chorus of voices that the author shares as an ethical commitment to collaboration. Even if Hernandez's name occupies the front cover as the book's author, she makes clear to the reader that this work is the result of the kinds of thinking and doing that she experienced with these girls and young women. They are her interlocutors, and Hernandez's understanding and respect of their time together is apparent throughout the book.

In addition to this ethnographic narrative, Hernandez proves to be a gifted reader of cultural and aesthetic objects alongside specific political contexts. She is able to deftly examine the representational politics of a magazine cover or a major pop artist like Nicky Minaj with the same level of attention that she brings to her young collaborators. This is also in part because of her ability to expertly engage with Black and Latinx feminist thought across each of the chapters in a way that both pays respect to these traditions while always offering an original and exciting argument that proves how the subjects she examines "agitate normative discourses of respectability and social mobility" (18).

Each chapter manages to develop a multifaceted yet rigorous argument, as illustrated by the second chapter, devoted to the Chonga girls of Miami and beyond. According to Hernandez, Chonga girls are part of a long genealogy of Latina excess that includes cholas

and pachucas, Chicana feminist figures who themselves exceed the traditional demands of feminine comportment. Chonga girls received popular attention in 2007, when the YouTube video "Chongalicious," made by two local Miami teenage girls, went viral. Hernandez analyzes the video to stage a discussion of the ways in which Chonga girls exceed the stereotypes ascribed to these girls. She explores how "when considering the race politics that shape discourses of Latinx mainstreaming through valuations of whiteness, the Chonga's association with Blackness signals a deviance that is to be disavowed in Latinx communities." Thus, rather than simply recuperate the Chonga girl for the sake of her argument, Hernandez lingers in the difficult and necessary politics that make these young women complicated figures both derided and celebrated. Ultimately, one of the book's greatest strengths lies in Hernandez's willingness to offer readers something beyond a celebratory narrative of the aesthetics of excess, allowing the complex racial, social, and economic realities of her case studies to be fully present, which in turn is a reflection of the love, kinship, and respect that she has for her objects (and subjects).

This brings me to another major element that makes this book so exciting: when I received the book, I was stunned by how absolutely *beautiful* it is. As Hernandez mentions in her acknowledgements, she secured enough financial support to produce a truly outstanding volume filled with images printed in color. Rather than an indulgence, the physical beauty of the book seems necessary in order to pay proper tribute to the acts of embodiment we encounter in these pages. Or perhaps more fittingly: to reprint these images in full color is itself a loving indulgence that recreates Hernandez's exploration of the glories of aesthetic excess. In many ways, the author's writing style matches this commitment. I was continuously impressed by the fact that Hernandez manages the difficult feat of crafting an approachable text that could be read by the young women she speaks with while remaining faithful to the demands of a scholarly monograph. *The Aesthetics of Excess* is conversational yet theoretically complex, the kind of book that can feel equally at home in an undergraduate course or a graduate seminar without losing any of its nuances. Ultimately, such accessibility is a testament to the way in which Hernandez and *The Aesthetics of Excess* model a form of ethical commitment to bringing the messy and beautiful complexities of gender, race, sexuality, and class into the academy. This is a thrilling work that never forgets that loving its subjects is essential to scholarly precision.

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# Author Information

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Iván A. Ramos is assistant professor in the Department of Theater Arts and Performance Studies at Brown University. His broader research investigates the links and slippages between transnational Latino/a/x American aesthetics in relationship to the everydayness of contemporary and historical violence. In particular, he is interested in how the aesthetic may provide a way to engage with an ethics of difference. His work brings together performance studies, queer and feminist theory, Latina/o/x American Studies, and media and film studies. His first book, *Sonic Negations: Unbelonging Subjects, Inauthentic Objects, and Sound between Mexico and the United States* (forthcoming from NYU Press), examines how "dissonant sound" brought together artists and alternative subcultures on both sides of the border in the wake of NAFTA to articulate a politics of negation against larger cultural and economic changes.

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## Article details

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